DIGITAL DIVIDE – ITS IMPLICATIONS ON CLASS DIVIDE

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ABSTRACT

Many people are perplexed as to why there is so much discourse about digital divide. Well, the conversation has been going on for a while, and many countries are beginning to take the issue of digital divide more seriously. The term "digital divide" refers to a situation in which people are unable to benefit economically and socially from information and communication technologies[i]. Digital divide has the ability to divide society into two strata. This disparity leads to a plethora of problems, including internal injustices inside a country. India has a reputation for being a technological powerhouse when it comes to information technology. The digital gap, on the other hand, continues to be an issue. The pandemic widened the chasm, resulting in the formation of two classes: those with Internet access and those without. In this paper, I'd like to talk about the concept of digital divide and how it affects the economy as a whole. The paper would also look into the relationship between Covid 19 and the digital divide. In addition, the report discusses the strategies India has used to close the digital divide in recent years. The paper will also discuss how large economies dealt with this problem and how they overcame it. The article also discusses the negative effects of technology on children and the issues that parents encountered during the pandemic. In addition to the above sub issues, the author of this paper would like to discuss the New Education Policy and how it might assist India in closing the technological gap. The introduction of 5G technology will be reviewed in order to see if it can be executed in India with 100% accuracy. Finally, the author hopes that by writing this paper, he may raise awareness about the topic of digital divide, so that more people are aware of it.

WHAT IS DIGITAL DIVIDE

The precise definition is very difficult, but in lay man terms digital divide can be understood as inequality in terms of information technology. In simple terms one can say that when people face injustice whether socially or economically due to non-availability of advance technology over others then the phenomenon can be termed as Digital Divide. Digital divide can exist at multitude of levels and can be characterised by different factors such as divide among occupations, Income brackets and age group. For example, when a person is employed at a lower wage scale in comparison to his peer who has the same qualification but because he has extra skills in terms of technological tools then that inequality is termed as Digital gap. The concept of digital divide means that digital inequality exists at two different levels. The first level digital inequality exists when the access to a particular necessary technology is not, they're with majority of the population. At the second level, the access is there but the individual does not know how to use it. The divide exists at different levels and its magnitude of spread varies from country to country. The main reasons for this divide is to be discussed at length in the later sections but to get a grasp, it is worthwhile to mention the two main characteristics of digital divide in any country.

1) The main reasons why digital divide exists more in developing countries is because the cost of setting up the necessary infrastructure is way too costly, which does not allow people to access internet.

2) Many people are still not aware of the term internet, and thus the major hurdle in bridging the gap is to educate the population about technological tools and in general create digital literacy.

RESULTANT EFFECT OF DIGITAL DIVIDE

After mentioning the two major reasons why digital divide exists, now let us focus our attention towards the main consequences one can face courtesy of this issue. The following are the 4 major effects of digital divide.

a) *Inefficient Communication and living in Isolation*

Lack of internet can lead to lack of communication, almost all over the world all major communication take place via emails, what's app or any other social media apps. Not having a good internet infrastructure could not only cause economic loss but many people who want to communicate with their relatives would be denied as well leading to social isolation and ultimately degradation in social relations. [ii]

b) *Loss of Education and Practical knowledge*

Many people after the Covid 19 pandemic shifted to online studies and therefore internet which once seemed to be a luxury item has now become a necessity. Education is an important Human right and therefore children who are not able to educate themselves due to lack of internet is a major cause of concern caused by this digital divide.

c) *Increased Unemployment*

All the major firms today post their job openings online and majority of the selection process is undertaken via online mode. People in rural areas are already battling the huge unemployment crises and if the jobs are now given via online mode, then this will lead to increased unemployment and increase rural distress.

d) *Gender Inequality*

In India women are more vulnerable to any bad social phenomenon than men. Whether it be lack of education and other social pressures not able to realise the fruits of technological advancement is one of them. Many problems of the women whether it be about their health or their safety, all of these can be tackled with the help of technology. Today many crimes are reported via online complaints as it helps in speedy disposal of cases, but if women won't be having any device like smart phones, internet then that facility will be of no use.

HOW TO TACKLE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The two biggest ways in which digital divide can be resolved are

1) Digital Literacy
2) Proving cost effectively Internet connection

Digital Literacy

Digital literacy is a very broad term and encompasses many different things. However, for the purpose of our article we would like to discuss the basic concept of digital literacy and how can it help in bridging digital divide. During the pandemic when most of the world was under strict lockdowns everything whether it be groceries or medication, everything was supplied via internet and apps. It is very surprising to see that when all the essential services were provided through internet, nearly 30 percent of the world did not even have internet connection[iii]. Then the issue arises as to why these 30 percent people were not able to get access to these online services. Many people argue that because of any digital infrastructure these people were denied any access but the core issue is that majority of these people were unaware that these kinds of services existed. Thus, the first problem is to tackle literacy among people or in more common-sense people should be made literate about technological advancement. This whole concept of spreading awareness about technological advancement is known as digital literacy. Educating people about digital advancement must begin at the grassroot level. As pointed out Digital Literacy is a social justice concept through which economic and cultural gap can be bridged. The only issue concerning digital literacy is that people sometimes madly fall in love with digitisation without the necessary skills and knowledge. In India many States Government are providing free laptops, tabs and smartphone to youth. Although it is an important step but the focus should be on educating people how to use these tabs and laptops in the best possible way, making them aware about the possible side effects and the advantage. In many villages people are still not able to get access to these technologies which can help them in easing their life and substantially raise their standard of living. The problem of Digital literacy can be tackled only with the help of proper government spending. When the government starts spending, Private sectors will contribute as well. Digital literacy has the potential to overcome the major barrier whether in terms of employment, or education or for that matter health.

Cost Effective Internet

One of the most vital factors in order to overcome digital divide is to provide people with cost effective internet services. India proudly can say that after 2016, there has been an internet revolution wherein people are getting ultra-cheap data at very low cost. Prior to that many telecom giants like Airtel, Vodaphone and Idea used to provide very expensive data packs which made the access to internet only a product which rich could afford. Now in India one can get access to data from Rs 50 to maximum Rs 1500. The price depends upon the quantity of data one uses or buys. Even considering the fact that if a person uses 1gb of data daily he need not spend more than Rs 250 per month for that. Additionally, the buyer also gets unlimited talk time and 100 SMS free. Thus after 2016 what we are seeing is that now even in villages people are buying smartphones which are also coming at a very affordable rates starting from Rs 5000. Yes, the cost is very effective but the issue of quality still remains an issue for majority of the Indian telecom users, who constantly complain regarding slow network issues. Another challenge to overcome digital divide is digital infrastructure. This issue is directly proportional to the cost of Internet provided. If the cost of setting up certain tower is lower the automatic result will also be reflected in the data plans. Yes, but one thing can be true is that despite many difficulties India has within few years has been able to reach a majority of its population when it comes to proving cost effective data.

COVID 19 AND ITS IMPACT ON DIGITAL DIVIDE

Covid 19 struck the whole world by surprise. It posed many challenges and revealed some loopholes in our system. Health and Education was one of the most affected sectors during the past two years. In this section the author would specifically discuss the impact of Covid 19 on Digital divide and how it widened the gap between the haves and have not had already existed. In India a complete lockdown was imposed in the month of March 2020. Majority of the school since then have been operating in online mode. Although online classes might seem more comfortable mode of educating children, but it can be a permanent solution. Many parents in India started raising voices against online education. There were genuine concerns which the parents and the government could not have ignored. First in India still 45 percent of the population is living in semi urban and rural areas, which means internet connectivity is not

available at its best form. Even, let us assume that there is internet connectivity, it must not be forgotten that online education demands making children sit near laptops and phones for at least 3 to 4 hours. This raises the question as to whether parents have that much number of finances to make their children study on laptops and phones on a regular basis. The answer to that question would be no. Secondly the issue of 24/7 electricity supply and purchasing laptops and computers worth 20,000 is in itself a big problem. Many governments try to bridge this gap by distributing free tablets and smartphones but the sheer number of people who doesn't have laptops and digital devices are too high. Thus, it would be right to say that Covid 19 has only added salts to the already carved wounds. In order to overcome this challenge, the government should actively take steps like building a good digital infrastructure, with smart schools and giving good quality digital devices to majority of the population. Secondly teachers must be trained how to operate on digital devices. Lastly, we must not forget the importance of physical education. It is very important to make children interact with their peers because digitally we could for once educate theoretically but socialization is as important as making students study digitally.

STEPS TAKEN BY INDIA TO OVERCOME DIGITAL DIVIDE

After the passing of Information and Technology Act 2000, many governments in India initiated projects to promote digital services and prioritize other sectors to shift to digital mode. Some of the projects that were launched in India to promote digital literacy are as follows

CARD Project

This project is called as computer aided administration of registration department (CARD). It was launched by the government of Andhra Pradesh. In this project many effective uses of IT were illustrated to the citizen in order to develop a more comprehensive citizen – government interface. One of the major impacts of this initiative was that now all the registration of lands were done via computer. The initiative made the formal registration more hassle free and easy.

Sourkaryan and E-Seva

This project is very popular among the people of Andhra Pradesh as it allows the citizens to pay taxes including property and other state taxes online. Moreover, the state Government's ongoing development projects and plans are also set out in this portal. The government of Andhra Pradesh also through this portal wanted to bridge the gap between bureaucracy and common man. It also launched "Cyber Grameen", a village broadband venture under which cyber hubs were established. The services in these cyber hubs included providing telephone services, telemedicine, online distance learning, providing email sending service and delivery of government service and information digitally.

The Bhoomi Project

An initiative of the Karnataka Government through which the government has recorded data of 67 lakh farmers and their ownership details. The data has helped the government to implement many pro farmer policies in State and also made sure that the exact beneficiary is reached. It also helped the government to distribute and settle many land disputes in amore efficient manner. The project was also lauded by the Commonwealth Association which awarded the project the award of Commonwealth Association of Public Administration and Management award. The project was also lauded by World Bank and United Nations Development Program.

The Gyandoot Project

It means knowledge messenger. It is India's first ever project wherein rural information network was created in Dhar district of Madhya Pradesh. Each village in the district had computer centres named "Soochnalayas" at important places. The citizen could easily ask through this computer device any information regarding crops, food grains and water resources in the district. 21 village panchayats in the whole district were connected with this computer project. Later on, the project was also supported by private organisations and the results were quite impressive. More than 7000 IT kiosks were added with the help of private sector and thus making the project successful.

5G Technology and a move towards digital independence

India is gearing up for a 5G revolution. Many telecom companies have conformed their plans to launch 5G technology in India. However, does it mean India will overcome the technological gap that has been created? To some extent we can say that 5G technology will not completely wipe them out the problem but sure will help in improving the situation. Currently in India many states are offering 4G services but some states are still offering 3G services. Therefore, it is too early to say whether India will completely shift to 5G in a day, but yes this will help in improving connectivity with faster internet services and easier way to communicate digitally. When 4G and 3G services were introduced, India did not have the necessary infrastructure to implement the same but with digital advancement happening at a much faster rate. Many tech giants like Airtel, Jio and Vodafone (now Vi) are planning to operate 5G services even in rural areas, the speed increase will mean that now more productive services can be offered at a much faster rate and this will boost up the pace of the economy as well. However, challenge still remains as to the efficiency of the speed and the bands which might come to India. Many smartphone companies have already rolled their smartphone supporting 5G technology and it has received a huge support from the people.

New Education Policy- An effort towards promoting digital education[iv]

NEP- 2020 has been discussed to be a new era of education in India's education history. The policy is designed to promote digital and online education while keeping in mind the downside of this as well. The NEP aims to promote online education and strive to attain higher standards of education. The policy aims to establish the National Educational Technology Forum, which will be responsible for standardising the content and adopt the evolving technologies for digital learning nationwide. It also has recommended some the following initiatives

1) To provide online learning tools to teachers and expand the scope of digital learning platforms like SWAYAM. The policy tries to create a two-way audio and video recording and monitoring system wherein teachers can track the progress and also teach their pupils.

2) Develop a digital coursework and Power point presentations and make online learning more student friendly as possible.

3) In order to encourage more practical activities platform like DIKSHA should be upgraded. To provide more socio-economically disadvantage section equal opportunity to learn and grow.

4) Increase access to tablets and digital devices which are the key to online learning. State governments are asked to provide these facilities to students at free of cost or at negligible rates in order to ensure equity among all students.

5) The most important aspect of the New Education Policy is to create the provision of National Assessment Centre in order to implement and make new assessment frameworks that keeps up with the needs of the 21st Century.

More steps recommended in NEP in order to promote digital learning and digital literacy include using of television, radio and community Radio and broadcast of educational programmes in regional language. Over all these schemes provide a good framework to bridge the digital gap but it also mentions that small steps are required to attain huge goals. Direct and huge reforms may lead to panic and inefficiency and therefore it is important to implement each and every point in NEP 2020 so that digital education gets recognition as soon as possible.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The only way forward towards attaining a digitally sound economy is to promote indigenous Information and Communication technology under the government's ambitious Atmanirbhar Abhiyan. This is not only help in making cost effective technologies but will cater to the needs of the Indian economy in a more proper way[v]. Many service providers in India are offering their services, the government needs to ensure that these service providers are not charging high rates otherwise accessibility of these services will be restricted. The government must focus on providing a National Digital Literacy program at the primary level in all government schools so that basic content is uploaded and is made available to the students. More funds should be provided and budgetary allocation must be done so that the government is made accountable for their promises. All the state government must adopt to digital infrastructure so that government services are made available to the citizens in an efficient manner. Regulations must be more liberal and should encourage the concept of reform rather than the concept of licencing and taxing more. Cyber security is the most important aspect which is to be kept in

mind while shifting to digital atmosphere. India is facing many issues in its Cyber technology and thus the need to implement a sound and safe Data Protection law is the need of the hour to keep up with these challenges. It is only when all these policies are implemented India can achieve true success and make itself digitally developed so that it can compete with other technologically developed nations.

ENDNOTES

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